

REMINISCING ON A WORLD CRUISE



SRI LANKA/INDIA

SRI LANKA

Having left Thailand and sailed the Andaman Sea and the Indian Ocean (beneath which the Tsunami quake occurred just a couple of months earlier) we arrived in the early morning at a container port in the commercial capital of Colombo. The extremely hot and humid conditions were somewhat relieved by a group of local dancers and musicians who greeted us on the quayside. We were heading out on a coach trip but the coach, unlike that in Phuket, was dirty and cramped, so much so that our knees contained deep indentations from being pressed against the seatback in front. The journey, which was advertised as taking half an hour, actually took two and a half hours and was uncomfortable in the extreme. En route to our destination of Negombo, via dusty roads teeming with totally undisciplined traffic, an unscheduled stop was made at a beachside fish market. Not everyone was happy



about this but we all trooped off the coach and traipsed through the burning sand to find ourselves witnessing an amazing spectacle. Firstly, in the intense heat of the day, great areas of this vast beach had been devoted to the laying out of gutted and salted fish to dry; a haven for the hungry birds swooping ravenously around us. Overpowered by the stench it was difficult not to retch. Walking on along the sand we witnessed a myriad of really interesting and fascinating sights. Groups of fishermen were standing around

shaking huge nets to loosen their catches of what were possibly small sardines. We watched as these fish were tipped into vast barrels of seawater where they are soaked before being salted. Next day they are re-washed in seawater before being laid out to dry. Another sizeable area of the beach contained countless vendors selling the array of freshly caught fish. We saw people in the sea

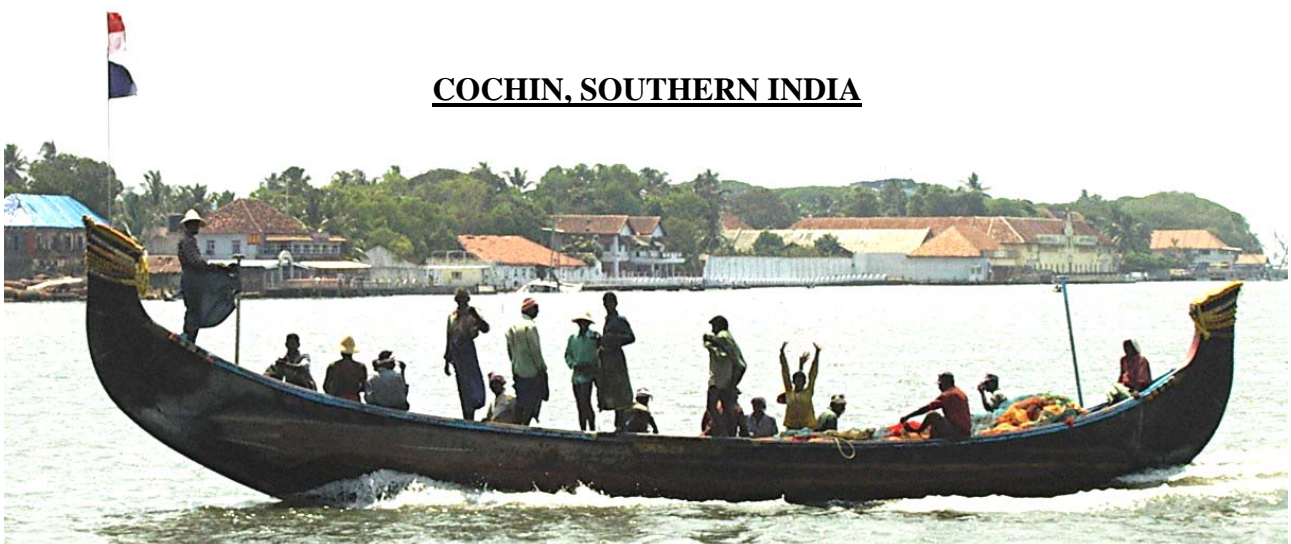
catching fish in small baskets, others in boats, but the most exotic of all were huge catamarans used for catching shrimps.

Their colourful sails are enormous and square, resembling Arabic sailing craft, and are unique to Negombo. A fisherman told us that this beach was affected by the Tsunami and he related his experience to us. Apparently no fishing took place for several weeks as it was imagined that the fish had fed on human flesh.



Back on the coach our journey through mainly squalid districts eventually brought us to the grounds of the Blue Oceanic Beach Hotel on the edge of the Indian Ocean, with white sands, clear blue water and swaying palms. Sighing with relief we headed for a couple of sun beds situated under a line of palm trees. BIG, BIG MISTAKE! Having stripped down to swimwear and stretched out in expectation of total relaxation, the relentless bombardment by beach sellers began. Great noisy groups gathered round like moths to a flame, pestering us beyond belief and driving us to utter distraction! The word NO is just not understood. After an extremely exhausting hour of this, we scuttled off to have a buffet lunch on the beach where we were serenaded by three men with guitars and gigantic Mexican hats, singing such ditties as “Green Green Grass of Home” and “Rocky Mountain High”. Strange but true! They were highly entertaining nevertheless and the food superb. We thoroughly enjoyed a splendid Sri Lankan buffet of seafood and fruit to die for. Heading back to the ship we passed many religious statues along the roadside, as this region was invaded by the Portuguese and the people are Roman Catholic. Our eventual return to the ship ended another exhausting but fascinating day. But not quite the end as it happened! About half an hour after setting sail from Cochin we were as usual on our balcony taking in the sights, when the coastguard’s motor launch hurtled towards us bearing two of the ship’s passengers, an elderly gentleman and his young carer. A rope ladder was thrown down the side and while both vessels were still speeding along they had to climb on board, the ladder swinging precariously as they did so. The sight will remain with us forever – what a cabaret! Yes, it’s true, if you miss the ship, it leaves without you! Later that evening we dined al fresco on the open deck amidst spectacular rain, thunder and lightening. Brilliant!

COCHIN, SOUTHERN INDIA





Well, what can one say! Our passage into Cochin Harbour, which is situated in the Arabian Sea, was unforgettable. Huge Chinese Cantilevered fishing nets line the entrance to this harbour where an entire fleet of assorted fishing vessels seemed to sail out to greet us. The nets are believed to have been originally brought to India by Chinese traders from Kublai Khan's court more than one thousand years ago. The giant nets, which

billow from massive bamboo or teak poles, filtered the morning light to create a wonderful romantic atmosphere as we first set eyes on mystical India. Intending to catch a ferry in the morning to a nearby island we were one of the first to disembark and were surprised, therefore, to be met by passengers already returning to the ship who breathlessly advised us that it was too dreadful to proceed beyond the port gates. However, being the intrepid travellers we had by now become we soldiered on and stepped through the gates into a nightmare of unimaginable pandemonium, mayhem and bedlam, all rolled into one, where hoards of wild people, all after their pound of our flesh and our money, greeted us. They pushed, shoved, manhandled and yelled at us en masse to either buy their goods or ride in their auto-rickshaw (these are covered three-wheeled scooters, with seats for two behind the driver, are extremely uncomfortable and driven not unlike bumper cars!). Unbelievably we actually ended up in one of these, a frightening little machine driven by a lunatic, who darted through the hot dusty streets at breakneck speed, only to end up at the wrong ferry terminal. In despair we decided to give up and stepped out, wanting to pay the man off. Even this was difficult as he didn't want to let us go, seeing the chance to make more money, and we had to resort to arguing loudly with the man and protesting that we didn't want him anymore. It was all such hard work! Having eventually sent him on his way, we were now somewhere we hadn't intended to be in a strange city. On looking around, however, we discovered it was quite a pleasant area situated along the waters edge and were able to enjoy a peaceful, undisturbed stroll, encountering a very sweet boy along the way who was selling bamboo recorders. After giving us a very skillful demonstration we purchased two for our grandsons. Heading back to the ship for lunch we encountered the turmoil and squalor of the port area once again where we had to battle our way back through the heaving throng to the cool sanity of the ship.



For the afternoon we had booked a cruise around the harbour and backwaters of Cochin but first we and the other passengers had to board several coaches parked within the port gates which were cramped, hot and filthy. The whole process took ages while we wilted and perspired a whole waterfall in the extreme heat inside the coach. The convoy eventually set off out through the port

gates, weaving around the waiting mad throng, turned the corner, travelled 50 yards and ground to a halt. Yes, we had arrived at our destination! Such a palaver! It's obviously felt to be a safer method than walking the distance. After more queuing, jostling and roasting, we eventually boarded a small two-tier local motor launch, the upper tier consisting of an overhead canopy and unfixed plastic garden chairs, which were actually extremely comfortable for the entire three-hour cruise. And so we set off at a very pleasant pace for what was to become one of the highlights of our World Cruise.



Cochin, now called Kochi, is blessed with one of the world's finest natural harbours, which has earned the town the title 'Venice of the Orient' and 'Queen of the Arabian Sea'. A city of peninsulas and islands with a mainland centre, Cochin's natural harbour, almost in the middle of the city, was created by the underwater

Malabar mudbanks that ensure its calm waters. Sailing around the islands of Vypeen, Gundu, Vallarpadam and Bolghatty and along the backwaters of the Pizhala Canal we entered a world completely alien to the one we know and was therefore an absolute delight. We saw so many extremely interesting sights including an amazing variety of fishermen and fishing boats, many more



Chinese fishing nets, lush tropical foliage, dolphins, herons, cranes and sea eagles with burnt orange wings. We passed many shack-like dwellings of various sizes while the inhabitants went about their daily business and some, especially children, came running to the waters edge, jumping and waving. This unforgettable boat trip will remain forever in our memory.

Then came the nightmare return trip to the ship; piling back on to the coaches where we virtually roasted alive during the completely chaotic 50 yard journey back through the port gates, where people were gathered in apparent frenzied madness, all shouting in unison, horns blasting, traffic snarled up where vehicles were attempting to travel in different directions, some trying to enter the port, others trying to leave. We were utterly filthy by the time we returned to our cabin and so body, hair, clothes and shoes needed a jolly good scrub!

Next port of call - the mysteries of Mumbai!

Maria Dillon